Special Edition
Reducing Prison Violence

Prison Culture and Prison Violence

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Introduction

Culture is described differently by different people. It is generally seen as being made up of the shared values, attitudes, goals, practices, stories, symbols, thoughts and behaviours of a group. These things can have different levels of importance for different group members, can be learned and are changeable over time. Culture is often spoken about in positive and creative terms, being developed through our interactions with each other and the environment and encompassing the ways that we adapt, survive and grow together. The more agricultural definitions of culture talk specifically about creating environments suitable for growth and 'cultivation'. It is therefore striking that when we think about the culture of our prisons, our image is likely to be far less positive or hopeful.

The importance of culture for the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) is clear through the focus of its first commissioning intention.[1] Not only relevant to desistance, prison culture has also been found to be an important contributing factor to violence in prisons.[2] There are focused efforts across NOMS to understand and reduce the levels of prison violence and so it makes sense for this work to consider our culture. This article will briefly consider the literature about prison culture and violence. It will then outline some ideas for how this can inform practice, with specific reference to some of the current initiatives across the high secure estate aimed at developing a more rehabilitative culture.

Prison culture and violence

To consider the cultural impact on violence we need to look at how violence is viewed, produced and used by a society.[3] Prisons have been described as distinct societies with their own cultures; cultures that have been defined and operationalised in different ways.[4] A cyclical relationship has been described; with violence being part of the prison culture and prison culture impacting on levels of violence.[5] When values and norms encouraging violence are widespread in a group, members may be violent as a result of adopting these values themselves and / or as a result of implicit or explicit pressure from others.

There are two different views in the literature about how the culture of a prison develops. One view is that it is a result of the criminal culture that individuals bring into prison with them from outside.[6] Prisons admit people with violent histories, troubled backgrounds and complex needs, making it likely that a culture including violence will develop. The other view is that prison culture develops as a response to the experience of imprisonment.[7,8] Powerlessness, deprivation, stigmatisation, a loss of material goods, disrespect and a fear of violence lead to a need to establish status and increase self esteem and control. Violence can be seen as a legitimate or necessary way to achieve these things. Sparks and colleagues took a holistic view, believing that prison culture was determined by both the pain of imprisonment and the influences of the outside world, but also, the ideology and management of the institution.[9]

This paper will focus more on culture development as a result of the experiences of being in prison. This is the area that, if we can understand it, may offer us the most scope to impact on our prisons culture. The roles of staff and prisoners can create a clear sense of 'us and them' and consequently separate staff and prisoner subcultures. There are a range of reasons why violence may result from aspects of the prisoner subculture.

1. *National Offender Management Service (2014). NOMS commissioning intentions from 2014*. London: NOMS.
2. Byrne, J. M., & Stowell, J. (2007). Examining the link between institutional and community violence: Towards a new cultural paradigm. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 12*, 552-563.
3. Noguera, P. (1996). *Reducing and preventing youth violence: An analysis of causes and an assessment of successful programmes.* Retrieved from www.inmotionmagazine.com/pedro3.html on the 8th April 2015.
4. Byrne, J. M., & Stowell, J. (2007). Examining the link between institutional and community violence: Towards a new cultural paradigm. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 12*, 552-563.
5. Cooke, D. J., & Wozniak, E. (2007). *Violence in Barbados prisons: Past, present and future*. Ontario: International Corrections and Prisons Association.
6. Irwin, J., & Cressey, D. (1962). Thieves, convicts and the inmate culture. *Social Problems, 10*, 142-155.
7. Sykes, G., & Messinger, S. (1960). The inmate social system. In R. A. Cloward, D. R. Cressey, G. H. Grosser, R. McCleery, L. E. Ohlin, G. M. Sykes, & S. L. Messinger (Eds.), *Theoretical studies in the social organisation of prison* (pp. 5-19). New York: Social Science Research Council.
8. Sekol, I. (2013). Peer violence in adolescent residential care: A qualitative examination of contextual and peer factors. C*hildren and youth services review, 35,* 1901-1912.
9. Sparks, R., Bottoms, A., & Hay, W. (1996). *Prisons and the problem of order.* Oxford: Oxfird University Press.

Relationships with staff, drugs, illicit economy, bullying, links to gangs within and outside of prison, and gambling can all be part of a prisoner culture and impact on violence in prisons. These are the focus of other articles within this edition and so will not be focused on here.

Violence can sometimes be the result of an outburst of anger or frustration in response to the experience of imprisonment. Factors such as feeling a loss of control or anticipation of being a victim of violence can generate fear and frustration which may result in emotionally driven or uncontrolled violence. Frustrations over long term imprisonment and complex routes for progression can impact on prisoner violence.[10] However, it is also the case that individuals who act out violently can become a liability for other prisoners, bringing unwanted attention and restrictions. *unpredictable* or uncontrollably violent individuals may actually fall down the pecking order and be managed, sometimes violently, by other prisoners.[11]

Violence is therefore also used strategically to manage life in prison. Whether resulting from the prison experience or life before prison the idea of the prisoner code is seen as highly influential in governing everyday prison life.[12] This includes ideas such as 'no grassing', no engaging with staff, and no showing any weakness. It can also include hierarchies relating to factors such as offence type or religion.[13] While a prisoner code permits violence, for example when the code is broken, prisoners can feel that these rules actually make for a safer rather than more violent prison.[14] The prisoner code can help generate solidarity and allows prisoners to regain some of the autonomy and control that they lose in prison; allowing them to actively engage in managing their own life. Prisoners have described violence being chosen as a way to teach people lessons about manners, control others, relieve the pressure, show they are in charge, and deal with daily problems.[15] Violence between prisoners can also been fuelled by conflicts over material gains and values; values such as loyalty, honour, fairness and power.[16] Prisoners manage a difficult balance of not appearing too passive, for fear of being victimised by other prisoners, and not being too aggressive for fear of being more tightly managed by staff.[17] This can require careful, controlled and conscious use of violence.

It is not only the subculture of prisoners that is important in shaping an establishment but also that of staff. Considering relationships with colleagues, occupational norms can bring pressures on people, sometimes profound sometimes subtle, to act in particular ways. Just as prisoners may feel they need to 'stick together', so can staff. The unwritten rules of 'not grassing' and always backing up colleagues can help to create solidarity and a sense of safety between staff as well as prisoners. Our attitudes and beliefs about why prisoners offend and the purpose of prison can also shape our behaviours towards colleagues and prisoners. There can be stigmatisation attached to getting involved in rehabilitative work with prisoners, with staff being dissuaded by colleagues or receiving criticism if the they take on these roles.

There are longstanding cultural expectations that officers will be fearless, resilient authoritative figures. Prison work is complex and demanding, generating a range of emotions in response to its unpredictability, including anxiety, fear, stress and depression. While the service acknowledges this, it is a place where disclosure of personal distress is uncommon. Possibly in response to this discrepancy, staff have identified being hardened by prison work; easily becoming blasé and insensitive when dealing with prisoners. Combined with a belief that the public and some managers have a negative perception of them and their work this hardening can contribute to feelings of demoralisation, resentment, a sense of 'us and them' and an increased likelihood of confrontational responses.

In addition to the culture of prisoner and staff groups, prison culture is also shaped by the interactions between staff and prisoners. A sense of respect, control and safety is important to all. When faced with aggression, staff can start to use restraint and punishment more. While this may be absolutely

> It is not only the subculture of prisoners that is important in shaping an establishment but also that of staff.

10. Liebling, A., & Arnold, H. (2012). Social relationships between prisoners in a maximum security prison: Violence, faith and the declining nature of trust. Journal of Criminal Justice, 40, 413-424.
11. Trammell, R. (2012). *Enforcing the convict code: Violence and prison culture*. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
12. Trammell, R. (2012). *Enforcing the convict code: Violence and prison culture*. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
13. Wills, F. (2014). The myth of redemptive violence in prison. *Atlantic Journal of Communication, 22,* 5-20.
14. Trammell, R. (2012). *Enforcing the convict code: Violence and prison culture*. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
15. Trammell, R. (2012). *Enforcing the convict code: Violence and prison culture*. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
16. Edgar, K. (2006). Assaults among young people in prison. *Criminal Justice Matters, 66,* 12-13.
17. Crew, B., Warr, J., Bennett, P., & Smith, A. (2013). The emotional geography of prison life. *Theoretical Criminology,* DOI: 10.1177/1362480613497778.

necessary at times, it impacts upon the culture; potentially contributing to further aggression. Some of the restrictive measures we use to manage violence, such as segregation, may actually contribute to an increased sense of a loss of control and autonomy; two factors that contribute to prisoner violence.[18] Aggressive incidents also impact on staff absenteeism, productivity, relationships, sensitivity and responsiveness to prisoners and can create fear in all. Indeed, it can be the possibility of violence as much as the level of actual violence that contributes to an establishments atmosphere and therefore its culture.[19] This anticipation can lead to non-violent prisoners being violent to protect themselves and send a message to others. It can also lead to staff wanting protect themselves and send a message about who is in charge.

While prison culture can clearly cultivate violence increased levels of support, respectful contact and opportunities for growth and learning have been found to reduce the number of aggressive incidents in secure units.[20,21] Having hope and motivation, being believed in and having a place in a social group are factors that contribute to desistance from offending, including violence.[22] As Byrne and Hummer point out: 'Rehabilitation loses meaning in a culture that teaches violence to nonviolent offenders and aggravates violent behaviour in those already violent themselves.'[23]

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both culture and violence are complex and inter-related phenomena. While prison culture influences our behaviour what we say and do influences our culture. Culture is changeable and can vary between, and even within, establishments so it is not the case that 'one size fits all' in terms of ways to create and maintain a culture that discourages violence. Given the constituents of culture it also does not lend itself well to being influenced and maintained through structured systems of targets and audits. The prison service culturally recognises and rewards concrete tasks and outcomes, but our culture is also made up of our underlying processes, attitudes and beliefs; the ethos behind what we do.

In response to NOMS first commissioning intention the High Security Prisons Group has started work to develop a more rehabilitative culture across its establishments, something that is beneficial for all.[26] A rehabilitative culture involves the elements of culture, such as relationships, attitudes and beliefs, regimes, rules and processes all contributing to a culture that is hopeful and supportive of change, progression and desistance from offending. This therefore relates to the culture that individuals bring with them into the establishment and that which is created in response to being in prison. There are clear similarities between the elements of culture believed to reduce prison violence and those that make up a rehabilitative culture, meaning that changing our culture in this way should both reduce violence and support wider rehabilitation. The high secure estate's rehabilitative culture strategy aims to strike a tricky balance of providing establishments with concrete support to understand and develop their culture whilst modelling the underlying theory of the strategy. This

Translating theory into practice

If culture is created and learnt then it is within our power to change the culture of our prisons, if we want to. Cultural change may help to reduce prison violence [24,25] but there are no simple solutions. As we have seen,

18. Nijman, H. L. I. (2002). A model of aggression in psychiatric hospitals. Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavia, 106, 142-143.
19. Crew, B., Warr, J., Bennett, P., & Smith, A. (2013). The emotional geography of prison life. *Theoretical Criminology*, DOI: 10.1177/1362480613497778.
20. Van der Helm, G. H. P., Stams, G. J. J. M., Van Genabeek, M., & Van der Lann, P. H. (2011). Group climate, personality and self-reported aggression in incarcerated male youth. J*ournal of Forensic Psychiatry and Psychology, 1*, 23-39.
21. Ros, N., Van der Helm, P., Wissink, I., Stams, J., & Schaftenaar, P. (2013). Institutional climate and aggression in a secure psychiatric setting. *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry and Psychology, 24*, 713-727.
22. Rehabilitation Services Group & Maruna, S. (2010). *Understanding desistance from Crime*. National Offender Management Service.
23. Wills, F. (2014). The myth of redemptive violence in prison. *Atlantic Journal of Communication, 22*, 5-20.
24. Byrne, J. M., & Hummer, D. (2007). Myths and realities of prison violence: A review of the evidence. *Victims and Offenders: An international Journal of evidence-based research, policy and practice, 2*, 77-99.
25. Lee, B., & Gilligan, J. (2006). The resolve to stop prison violence project: Transforming an in-house culture of violence through a jail-based programme. *Journal of Public Health, 27*, 149-155.
26. O'Brien, R., Marshall, J., & Karthaus. (2014). *Building a rehabilitative culture*. RSA Transitions. Retrieved from www.thersa.org on the 10th April 2015.

involves allowing establishments to maintain ownership and responsibility for their work in this area; allowing differences across the estate to be recognised at management level; and avoiding the generation of inappropriate performance targets focusing solely on tasks and outcomes at the expense of other less concrete but equally important elements of culture.

It is important to first understand our culture if we want to effectively influence it. A number of assessments exist that can be used to capture elements of prison culture, including PRISM[27] and MQPL.[28] Interventions Services have also developed a Rehabilitative Culture Questionnaire, used by all sites that deliver accredited interventions. Across the high secure estate culture is being explicitly explored through the culture web. The culture web, developed by Johnson and colleagues,[29] consists of six interrelated elements relevant to organisational culture. These are: the stories, rituals and routines, symbols, organisational structure, control systems and power structures of an organisation. Initial sessions are led by an Organisational Development practitioner external to the establishment but these can then be run by establishments with different staff and prisoners groups in order to gain a fuller understanding of their culture. The session considers the six elements to understand the current culture but also how people would like the culture to be in the future. Differences are identified and used to inform plans for working towards cultural change. When planning cultural change establishments can consider four levers that need to point towards a rehabilitative culture for change to be successful.[30] These are: the symbols around us (e.g. posters and language), rewards and measurements (what we pay attention to), behaviours (how people succeed and how we can encourage this) and the business context (our policies and processes). Establishments are encouraged to take this initial exploration into their culture forward and explore their policies, practices, relationships and beliefs more widely to identify opportunities to further develop their rehabilitative culture.

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For some places the cultural web may identify a need for change in order for a rehabilitative culture to develop. Given this potential need for change, and the fact that a rehabilitative culture in itself includes a belief in the possibility of change, the development of a rehabilitative culture involves an explicit focus on hope and its importance for all. We need hope that our working environments can get better and hope that offenders are capable of change. Violence can be the result of individuals feeling hopeless about their current situation and the future. Hope has been found to be a critical aspect of successful change and so it has an important role in helping staff and prisoners adapt to changes across our service and in reducing re-offending for prisoners. Hope can also lead to creative ways of problem solving and open up new possibilities. Sharing our hope with others can also enhance our own levels of hope. One description of hope is that it has two elements; namely *'the will'* and *'the way'*.[31] The idea being that we need the willpower or energy to achieve a goal (the will), and the perceived ability and ideas about how to achieve it (the way). People with higher levels of hope have been found to perform better at work, have more goals, be more successful in achieving their goals, be less distressed, happier, better at coping in difficult situations and generally feel more satisfied and less likely to experience burnout.[32,33]

To help support establishments a handbook of initiatives is also being developed. These initiatives aim to influence various different aspects of the culture including: relationships, engagement in the regime, our knowledge and beliefs, and support and recognition. While it is expected that all establishments will make use of the early chapters of this handbook it will be for them to decide which other chapters, if any, would best meet their needs. The aim of the handbook is to share best practice across a range of areas; both to support implementation but also to generate the best possible evidence of effectiveness.

One example of an approach from the handbook is the Strategy of Choices.[34] This will already be familiar to

27. Johnstone, L. & Cooke, D.J. (2008). PRISM Promoting Risk Intervention by Situational Management: Structured Professional Guidelines for Assessing Situational Risk Factors for Violence in Institutional Settings.
28. Liebling, A., Hulley, S., & Crewe, B. (2012). Conceptualising and measuring the quality of prison life. In D. Gadd, S. Karstedt, & S, Messner, S. (Eds.) The Sage Handbook of Criminological Research Methods (p. 358-372). London: Sage
29. Johnson, G., Whittington, R., & Scholes, K. (2012). Fundamentals of Strategy. UK: Pearson Education.
30. de Lattre, M. (2003) A Culture of Innovation. In A. Jolly (ed.) *Innovation – Harnessing Creativity for Business Growth*. Kogan Page.
31. Snyder, C. R. (1995). Conceptualizing, measuring and nurturing hope. *Journal of Counselling and Development, 73*, 355-360.
32. Larsen, D. J., Stege, R., & Flesaker, K. (2013). 'It's important for me not to let go of hope': Psychologists' in-session experiences of hope. *Reflective Practice, 14*, 472-486.
33. Valle, M. F., Huebner, E. S., & Suldo, S. M. (2006). An analysis of hope as a psychological strength. *Journal of School Psychology, 44*, 393-406.
34. Harris, D., Attrill, G., Bush, J. (2005). Using choice as an aid to engagement and risk management with violent psychopathic offenders. I*ssues in forensic psychology, 5,* 144-151.

many involved in offending behaviour programmes. This is a strategy for communicating that combines the exercising of authority with respect for the individual's right to make their own decisions. It demands people make their own decisions without giving them permission to break the rules and do as they please. Choosing to be disruptive or violent attracts different consequences than choosing to engage. In this way the strategy is transparent about each offender's right to choose their own path, but also about staff's right to protect themselves and others. This strategy is compatible with the suggestion that our first approach with violent prisoners should be to make them aware that their behaviour is not acceptable and reminded of the consequences of their actions.[35] It is also fits with the literature regarding violence in prison, in that it encourages respectful communication, the use of legitimate authority and supports opportunities for change and progression. It also creates a sense of control for prisoners as it requires them to actively engage in managing their own life.

The practical elements of the handbook are being developed through stakeholder events whereby the establishments themselves decide how best to turn the theory into meaningful practice. It is recognised that managers are crucial to maintaining a culture,[36] with this work being actively supported by the DDC of the High Security Estate and the Governors of every establishment. However, the wider staff group and prisoners are also critical to the understanding, development and maintenance of culture. As such this work includes input from all grades and disciplines of staff as well as prisoners.

NOMS processes and the messages these give make up an important part of our culture. Within this, the sentence management process is particularly significant for offenders. As such it is important for this to be compatible with a rehabilitative culture. As a group the High Security Estate is specifically focusing on the Category A review element of the sentence management process. A Category A prisoner is one whose escape would be highly dangerous to the public, police or security of the state and for whom the aim must be to make escape impossible. This group therefore potentially includes prisoners at high risk of being violent. Once classified as a Category A prisoner an individual is periodically reviewed with a view to downgrading them if sufficient progress regarding risk has been made. This has historically felt like quite a hopeless process and can set the tone for the rest of someone's sentence.

Creating a Category A review process that is less repetitive, more user friendly and is clear about the value of everyone's contributions will hopefully be more engaging and meaningful for staff; ensuring that everyone's knowledge and expertise is heard. The new process also explicitly considers positive behaviours and factors that may help protect an individual from future offending (protective factors). This should mean that the process is also less frustrating and more engaging and progressive for prisoners. Acknowledging protective factors and progress, even if not sufficient for a downgrade in category, can help to promote further progress and create a sense of hope for the future. This, combined with clear targets and a clear route for progression, can also help increase an individual's sense of control and therefore responsibility over their own future.

All of this work is in its early stages and, while based on sound theory, there is a clear need to continue to drive its implementation and evaluate its effectiveness. Anecdotally, it already appears that culture can start to feel different in places that start to progress this work. It will be important to see if this is the case for all and ultimately if it impacts on violence in custody, progression and desistance from offending.

Conclusion

Prison culture and prison violence are complex but highly inter-related. Given that we shape our culture we have the power to change it and therefore impact on prison violence. The elements of culture that may help reduce violence overlap with those that help to create a more rehabilitative culture. Increasing a sense of control and responsibility, increasing hope for progression and change, and ensuring we acknowledge and reward progress for staff and prisoners, are all relevant for a rehabilitative culture and violence reduction. The high secure estate has started work to try and improve its rehabilitative culture, which it believes will also impact on prison violence. This work can support the more explicit work through structured treatment programmes. Given the challenges of developing a culture that is more rehabilitative within a high security environment, the passion of staff for this to happen, combined with their development of creative ways to achieve it, can hopefully help to increase hope for others that this is not only possible but also worthwhile.

35.   Safer Custody PSI (64/2011).
36.   Kane-Urrabazo, C. (2006), Management's role in shaping organizational culture. Journal of Nursing Management, 14, 188–194.